



Cuba's Freirean Agro-Revolution

Campesino a Campesino

Carmelo Ruiz-Marrero

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"During the Special Period's most difficult years, countless and creative solutions were found by our campesinos and agricultural science researchers. There was one objective and one priority: to recover our agricultural systems and produce what's necessary to feed ourselves. However, we needed integrating and modeling concepts for the changes that were now indispensable, and we found them in agroecology."

- Orlando Lugo-Fonte,
President of the National Association of Small Farmers of Cuba (1)

Cuba is the one country in the world that has made the furthest strides, and in the shortest time, in moving from industrial conventional agricultural production to organic farming. This achievement has been celebrated and documented by numerous experts and observers, including land reform scholar Peter Rosset and agroecologist Miguel Altieri, academic bodies like the Latin American Scientific Society of Agroecology (SOCLA), and NGO's such as Food First and the Worldwatch Institute, and have been the subject of a 2006 documentary, titled *The Power of Community: How Cuba Survived Peak Oil* (2).

The country was in a very unusual and critical situation at the beginning of the 1990's. With the implosion of the Soviet block, the subsidies that Cuba received in the form of food and farm inputs ceased overnight, causing an unprecedented crisis. With the Torricelli and Helms-Burton Acts, passed in 1992 and 1996 respectively, the American embargo tightened its noose around Cuba's economy, further worsening an already dire scenario. But the Caribbean island nation pulled through by way of a successful transformation of its agricultural model, moving it towards agroecological production largely based on small family farms.

Back in March in the Colombian city of Medellín I had the great pleasure of spending time with Cuban professors Fernando Funes and Luis Vásquez, both of them scientists of international renown and faculty members of SOCLA's doctoral program (3). Between long walks through the city center and over beers in the Pilarica neighborhood, we talked at length about the challenges of agriculture, ecology and socialism. This article is based on those conversations and on published writings by Funes and other authors.

Funes says that following the withdrawal of Soviet support, "the critical situation created in Cuban agriculture propitiated the transformation of the agrarian structure and the reach of a new technological, economic, ecological and social dimension, with the end of achieving food security with new methods and strategies." (4)

But before seeking to apply the Cuban experiences to other countries and contexts it is necessary to consider the country's unique and extraordinary circumstances. The 1959 revolution and subsequent sweeping land reform were a unique happening in Latin American history: the landed ruling class was defeated, uprooted and expelled. The country's wealth and land were redistributed; and as a result, access to land is not a problem, and all farmers in the country enjoy first-rate free education and health care. Latin America's land-owning elites, assisted by the murderous US counterinsurgency, have not spared any resources, be they financial, ideological or military, to prevent another Cuban-style revolution in the Western hemisphere.

Nevertheless, many of Cuba's lessons can be learned and applied in other countries. One of the key elements in the success of agroecology and food sovereignty in Cuba has been the support of the state. The Cuban experience demonstrates that a successful transition to agroecology requires major involvement by the public sector. The country's organic revolution contradicts the common image of the Cuban government as bureaucratized and lacking in creativity or imagination. If the Cuban state were as inflexible and inefficient as the revolution's derisive critics make it out to be, it would not have taken the right measures, and in a rapid and decisive manner, to avert a fatal food crisis.

Among the concrete steps taken by the government are the establishment of 276 centers for the reproduction of entomophages and entomopathogens (organisms that are natural enemies of pests), a National Urban Farming Program with 26 subprograms that span the production of vegetables, medicinal plants, condiments, grains, fruit, and animal breeding (hens, rabbits, sheep, goats, pigs, bees and fish) that are developed throughout the country, and a program for the promotion of ecological agriculture within the National Association of Small Farmers (ANAP).

Funes explains the fundamentals of this ecological agrarian revolution: “These advances went from the use of biopesticides and biological controls, to different applications of biofertilizer, compost, earthworm humus, biosoils, animal traction, etc., on a grand scale and in a rapid manner.” The techniques explored and developed also included polyculture, rotation, intelligent use of nitrogen-fixing legumes, and a great variety of ecological solutions for pest and weed problems.

Along with innovation also came full acknowledgement of ancient traditions of great relevance and usefulness. Says Funes of the Cuban campesino sector’s recovery from the crisis:

“A mixture of traditional farming practices and organic fertilization common in the Cuban countryside, brought in from Europe by Spanish immigrants centuries back, and appropriate strategies for climate management, phases of the moon and many times even religious beliefs and sayings embedded in peasant wisdom, no doubt permitted this sector to be the one that showed a most convincing recovery- and in the least amount of time- to the crisis of inputs.”

But state action by itself, though necessary, is not enough to carry agroecology forward. This has been proven in Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador, where progressive governments oriented by Bolivariano anti-imperialist ideals fully favor food sovereignty and ecological agriculture and have made of them official state policy. These governments issued directives to this effect to the public universities and agriculture ministries, but nothing happened. Bureaucrats, agronomists and academic scholars raised and formed in the green revolution model of US-style industrial mechanized chemical-intensive farming, simply ignored the dictates from the higher echelons and continued doing what they had always done: promote monocultures and pesticides while ignoring the new agricultural practices and discourses that originated from ecology and grassroots mobilization.

Not to say that nothing was achieved there. The Andes region is one of the world’s hotbeds of peasant-based agroecological innovation, and Venezuela hosts the Paulo Freire Latin American Institute of Agroecology (IALA). But bureaucratic resistance from the mid-layers of government has thwarted the potential for a truly profound transformation of agriculture. The achievements of these three South American countries pale in comparison with Cuba’s organic revolution. How did Cuba do it?

Cuba prevented its organic agroecological revolution from suffering a bureaucratic death thanks to a combination of decentralization and participatory models. State enterprises were broken up into Basic Units of Cooperative Production (UBPC).

According to Funes, this has given farmers the liberating feeling of being owners of the land they work by giving them real protagonism in decision-making processes, which has resulted in increased productivity. The word he uses is *autogestión*, a Latin American word that describes processes of self-management and enhanced individual autonomy in small-scale enterprises.

One of the hallmarks of Cuba's agroecological revolution is the development of innovative and novel participatory methodologies of agricultural research with horizontal processes of discussion, validation and adaptation of new ideas and proposals. These methodologies, which owe much to Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed", are known collectively as *campesino a campesino* (peasant to peasant). Born in the Mesoamerican region in the 1970's, CAC has revolutionized ecological farming all over Latin America and is spreading all over the world. Its remarkable history is told in Food First director Eric Holt-Giménez's book *Campesino a Campesino: Voices from Latin America's Farmer to Farmer Movement for Sustainable Agriculture* (5).

According to the recent book *Revolución Agroecológica en Cuba* by Peter Rosset et al.,

"CAC is an energizing methodology, it places the campesino and his/her family as protagonists of their own destiny; in contrast to classical extensionism, static and demobilizing of the campesino base, based on the technician as transmitter of knowledge... it is based on horizontal transmission and the collective construction of knowledge, practices and methods. In other words, it tries to incorporate campesino tradition and innovation in order to add them to the results of scientific research in agroecology."

According to Rosset et al., "agroecology has achieved in little over ten years what the conventional model has never achieved in Cuba or anywhere: produce more with less (foreign exchange, inputs and investment)". (6)

According to ANAP president Orlando Lugo-Fonte, the most important factor in the success of agroecology in Cuba is "the Revolution, which gave us, and guaranteed us, property of the land; which developed us educationally, technically and socially; which inculcated in us the values of collectivism, cooperation and solidarity. But, above all, it dignified the men and women of the countryside and made them owners and made them responsible for much more than their parcel. It has made women and men conscious of their responsibility: feeding the people and protecting the environment, so that future generations of Cubans can also eat and have a clean and healthy countryside in which to live."

“Thanks to all its revolutionary history, which dates back to the XIX century, the Cuban peasantry has accumulated very many experiences”, says Brazil’s João Pedro Stédile, one of the leaders of his country’s Landless Workers’ Movement (MST). “Apart from having gone through the green revolution, it has maintained its people’s revolution alive and has for fifty years been resisting against all aggressions of imperialism. For this, it is today the campesino sector that’s most ideologically and scientifically prepared to help us all campesinos and campesinas of the world to deal with the challenges imposed by capital”. (7)

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- 1) Orlando Lugo-Fonte. Taken from the prologue to Revolución Agroecológica en Cuba: El Movimiento Campesino a Campesino de la ANAP en Cuba. B.M. Sosa, A.M. Roque Jaime, D.R. Avila Lozano y P.M. Rosset. First edition published in Cuba in 2010.
- 2) Funes et al. “Sustainable Agriculture and Resistance: Transforming Food Production in Cuba” Food First Books
http://www.foodfirst.org/store/book/Sustainable_Agriculture_and_Resistance; Ben Block. “Traditional Farmer Knowledge Leads Cuba to Organic Revolution” Worldwatch Institute <http://www.worldwatch.org/node/6435>;
 “The Power of Community: How Cuba Survived Peak Oil”
<http://www.powerofcommunity.org/cm/index.php>, You can see the whole documentary in: <http://vimeo.com/8653921>
- 3) SOCLA PhD program blog <http://doctoradoagroecoudea.wordpress.com/>
- 4) Fernando Funes-Monzote. “La agricultura cubana en camino a la sostenibilidad”. LEISA magazine, July 2001.
- 5) http://www.foodfirst.org/store/book/Campesino_a_Campesino
- 6) Revolución Agroecológica en Cuba: El Movimiento Campesino a Campesino de la ANAP en Cuba. B.M. Sosa, A.M. Roque Jaime, D.R. Avila Lozano and P.M. Rosset. First edition published in Cuba in 2010.
- 7) João Pedro Stédile. Taken from his prologue for Revolución Agroecológica en Cuba: El Movimiento Campesino a Campesino de la ANAP en Cuba. B.M. Sosa, A.M. Roque Jaime, D.R. Avila Lozano and P.M. Rosset.

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Friends of Cuba, see also: [Mikowsky's Return to Cuba](#)

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